Sarojini Naidu Medical College, Agra

Among the oldest Medical Colleges in India Sarojini Naidu Medical College, Agra named after the inimitable freedom fighter and poetess Sarojini Naidu, who subsequently became governor of the United Provinces, is among the three oldest medical colleges in India. Its alumni head many departments in hospitals and colleges across India. Dr Jyotsna Codaty traces the long history of the college and its many contributions to the field of medicine.

Located on the banks of the river Yamuna, Agra is part of that legendary India known as Braj, where Lord Krishna was born. Founded by King Ugrasen, the maternal grandfather of Lord Krishna, the very name has multifarious origins: Agraban, one of the twelve forests of Braj Mandal, *aga* or fire, Agra means fort or priory, *agara* or habitation, and *aga raha* the site ahead. In more ways than one Agra has been ahead of its times; a showcase for the world to glance at its tantalizing treasures. Way back in 1585, Ralph Fitch, a tireless English traveller, described it as a magnificent city having a 'longer dimensions and a population greater than of London'. It is another matter that today Agra is popularly known as the home of the Taj Mahal.

"Made in Agra" is a label that sells. Agra is synonymously associated with the replicas of the magnificent Taj Mahal in all sizes and materials, the handcrafted embroidered black *batuwas* and the peacock feather *pankhas* that tempt tourists, to the mounds of *petha* consumed by gourmands. However, there is more to Agra, more than what the casual tourist sees. A complex of building, and it is not Dayal Bagh, is equally famous, if only in the select circle of the world of Indian medicine. The complex of buildings signifies excellence in medical education and has done so for over a century. It was from here that the light of knowledge spread to nearly every medical college north of the Vindhyas until government policies put a stop to in the late 1960s. Sarojini Naidu Medical College, one of the oldest medical schools in India, is a beacon of knowledge that is easily identified as "the" college to which the rest of the country looked up as a pathfinder. "Show us a medical college from Patna to Gujarat or Amritsar to Madhya Pradesh that did not have a professor from S. N. Medical College right from its inception," proudly challenges Dr. Arun Nagarath, the present Professor of Obst & gynaecology whose father was a student of the earlier batches.

The years 1854, 1939, and 1949 are landmark years for S. N. Medical College. However, as all stories must start at the beginning. 1854 is where we will begin. By 1854 the East India Company was well entrenched, as also was the Presidency of Bengal, making its presence felt as a military garrison. In later years this presidency was divided into Fort Williams at Calcutta and the United Provinces, which after India's Independence became Uttar Pradesh, as we know it. Military needs were paramount in those times and the Lieutenant Governor of the Province, Sir John Thompson, laid the foundation of a small medical school whose principal objective was to produce medical assistants to work for the Indian army and to look after the health of the military personnel. Maintenance of this school and hospital was the responsibility of the East India Company.

This modest school was named after him, and the hospital attached to it was Thomson Hospital and remained so for nearly a century. Historically, it was the third medical school in India, those at Calcutta and Royapuram, Madras having already been established. The first principal was surgeon John Murray to be followed by assistant surgeon T. Farquarhar. The rest of the staff consisted of two European assistant surgeons and two Indian sub-assistant's surgeons. The school itself comprised two buildings bearing the hallmark of British architecture. One was used as an administrative building and outdoor dispensary while the other housed the medical, surgical and eye wards.

The duration of study for these medical assistants was three years, anatomy, Materia medica. chemistry, botany, medicine. surgery, and midwifery were taught. The first batch passed out from Thomson Medical School in 1857 just as India began its monumental freedom struggle. A little later the great sepoy rebellion at Meerut in 1857-58 disrupted its functioning, but this resumed shortly after and continued for many years.

Principals of the College 1935-2005

Lt Col. J C Bharucha
Maj. Gen. H C Buckley
Dr. C N Vyas
Dr. H N Bhat
Dr. P N Wahi
Dr. Inderjit Singh
Dr. T C Gupta
Dr. Nawal Kishore
Dr. B B Sharma
Dr. S R Kapur
Dr. S S Mishra
Dr. Y P Singh
Dr. D N Prasad
Dr. C D Gupta
Dr. S C Gupta
Dr. Hari Gautam
Dr. Smt V L Lahiri
Dr. A S Sachan
Dr. S C Sahu
Dr. Veena Mishra
Dr. V K Jain
Dr. C U Qureshi
Dr. Deoki Nandan Sharma

In 1872, Thomson Medical School threw open its doors to civilians, and they were permitted to study for the licentiate course with an LMP diploma being awarded to them. The year 1883 saw a dramatic development. Brigade surgeon A J Hilson, a dynamic principal who was in the office between 1876-87, made a revolutionary proposal to the government that a class be opened for women assistants in Agra. In two years, by 188S, two women candidates were admitted, one of them a Brahmin girl in her teens, a rather controversial social event in those times. Sadly, it was found that these lady students could not find easy access to the hospital wards given the social customs prevalent in these parts. The principal was obliged to make a special provision for women and female children to be examined, a boon to both the patients and lady students. It was thus that Lady Lyall Dufferin Hospital and Medical School for Women commenced in right earnest with proper facilities. The 'male' section of the medical school, under the name Agra Medical School, with the attached hospital continued with the name of Thomson Hospital.

The buildings multiplied with new operation theatres, outpatient departments and wards being added, as space was never a constraint. The wards, like the Wilcock wards and others, were resembling structures built scenically over large tracts of land. A culture of honouring teachers by naming the newly built wards after them, to wit Omears Ward, Cochran Ward, Austin Smith Ward and Rahman Ward began. With time some of these structures were razed down to make way for the modern multi-storied building that is today’s edifice, leaving only the library and administrative block to stand witness to the architectural design of the early days.

By 1923, this women's school Lady Lyall Hospital, became a well- identified entity with little connection to the erstwhile Agra Medical School. At about the same time another 'all women's medical college' was founded in Madras. In 1939, the next landmark date, this medical school was upgraded to a college and called Agra Medical College affiliated to Agra University and authorized to award the MBBS degree with Lt Col. J C Bharucha, IMS, as its head. In a trend that was to later abolish all such segregation, Agra Medical School for Women was amalgamated with Agra Medical College in 1943. The first batch of graduates of Agra Medical College passed out in 1944.

Dr. Nawal Kishore, now in his eighties and a well-respected professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, belonged to that debut batch of 1944 and was the first student who was privileged to belong to both the licentiate and graduate classes. “I was permitted to do the MBBS course in two years as I had already passed the licentiate exam. Our exams were held every six months instead of at the end of the year,” he reminisces of his days in college. “The purdah system was prevalent in these areas, and obstetricians were needed to attend to the hundred odd beds in Lyall hospital. It was thus easy for me to enter this field."

He recalls Dr R P Singh vividly. "He was an anatomist who started three medical colleges," he declares. "When I was still in the licentiate class, Dr Rahman was the principal and, soon after it became a college, Col Bharucha took over." Great memories from one who has seen the baton passed from one era to another and yet another until he retired. "We were about 45 students in the class." he adds. Drs G L Vyas and K N Gaur he credits with teaching of medicine, Dr Sailesh Mitra and Dr Baijal, a surgeon from England taught surgery (his full name he regrets he cannot recollect.) While Dr. Chunnilal Mukherjee, a legend who they say studied his way to posterity under a lamp post, trained him in midwifery. The duo of Maj. Haplett and Dr. Chunnilal were awesome in their teaching skills, according to the elderly professor. “All the HODs in my speciality, from its inception to present times, were my students at some time,” he proudly adds.

During all these years the minimum qualification was that of a school leaving certificate and an interview was held to test the aptitude of the student. As a prelude to the glad tidings that were to come in later years in the form of its elevation to a medical college, a general improvement in the standard of medical education was affected by the appointment of full-time lecturers in anatomy, physiology, and pharmacology in 1931. To further reinforce their high expectations from students, the college began conducting a pre-medical test for admittance by 1935, perhaps the first instance of a written admission examination in the annals of education in India. This test of capability continued at Agra Medical College for decades until a common entrance test for all colleges in UP came into vogue. One reaps as one sows. Agra believes...

After India's Independence the poet and eminent freedom fighter Sarojini Naidu became the governor of the large state of Uttar Pradesh. In her honour Agra Medical College was renamed Sarojini Naidu Medical College, and is popularly called S. N. Medical College. Thompson Hospital became S. N. Hospital. Soon S. N. Medical College received recognition from the Indian Medical Council and the General Medical Council of Great Britain, and the first batch of postgraduate students passed out in 1948.

Subsequently each five-year plan saw improvements and additions to the college, and currently this erstwhile leader of medical education under the leadership of principal, Dr Deoki Nandan Sharma, a dynamic administrator and well-known teacher of Social and Preventive Medicine, hopes to receive sanction to take the giant leaps that it richly deserves.

The anatomy department, among other things, is remembered for its special ethnography collection where over five hundred skulls of Indian and foreign origin are treasured like prized scalps acquired after each victory. Prof. Inderjit Singh of physiology obtained his PhD from Cambridge where in the chronicles of this great University, is the remark: A thesis, notable and long remembered as being the most compendious, which has come before the relevant examination committee within living memory.

When naming the teachers whose contribution is noteworthy. Dr I P Elhance. former professor of surgery and eminent teacher, in his chronicles of the college, listed a modest 60 doctors deserving of this honour! Any list, however one looks at it, would bear the name of Prof. P N Wahi at its head. A dynamic administrator and eminent pathologist, he was single-handedly responsible for putting the name of S. N. Medical College on the world map with his work on pro pharyngeal cancers. Prof. S P Srivastava was the hand that helped provide succour to these cancer cases with his skilful surgery, devoting such meticulous care of his humble patients that is comparable to the attention VIPs receive nowadays. S. N. Medical College honoured his memory by renaming the old surgical ward. Dr Wahi was the one who guided the college for the longest duration during its golden days. Plaudits went hand in hand with the tough reputation of a hard taskmaster.

The working rules during his times were simple. Rule 1: Boss is always right; Rule 2: In case of doubt, consult rule 1. Prof. M. P. Mehrotra, K. S. Mathur, M C Gupta, and Ram Singh in medicine. Prof. H S Asopa in surgery (who is known the world over for the single stage repair in the penile hypospadias operation), and Dr Hari Gautam, eminent cardiothoracic surgeon who was appointed as Vice Chancellor of Banaras Hindu University - a medical man occupying that chair for the first time in medical history - were names to reckon with. The department of gynaecology has been a strong department in this college. Dr Ramesh Chandra, who was a student of the fourth batch, talks of the opposition he faced from his father in the 1940s when he voiced his choice of specialty.

Says Dr Ramesh Chandra: “He expected me to be a surgeon and not end up doing a dai’s work.” A discussion with Maj. Haplett who explained to him the training helped his father to see things in the proper perspective. Today the venerable eighty-year-old Dr Ramesh Chandra proudly asserts, “The women of Agra felt a bit upset, if a lady doctor examined them. They prefer the male specialists as this department has had male gynaecologists right from the outset: Drs Nawal Kishore, Barun Sarkar, Arun Nagrath, and Mukesh and Mukul Chandra, and myself, they say it infuses a sense of confidence,” he confides.

"The student-teacher relationship was sacrosanct. All help was given to us, but there was never any interaction beyond college hours," Dr. Ramesh Chandra comments of the prevailing atmosphere of his time. "It was a gay place, replete with both cultural and academic activities with a strong emphasis on ethics. Why, all of us knew the Hippocratic oath by rote," he adds. “All the professors were very positive during the viva examination and never cornered us unless they were confident of the students' capabilities. I remember the gynaecology examination where the examiner Maj. Haplett was our teacher. He pointed towards me and told her, 'Ask him what you want.' I fared well and she gave me the thumbs up signal." says Dr Ramesh Chandra. "I was happy I did not let down my teacher," he adds, acknowledging the part his teacher played in his success.

Dr. Elhance writes about the polite ragging of those early days. "Gentlemanly ragging. We called the freshers panchis, or birds that would soon fly high from their newly arrived status to become stalwarts of the college.” In an era and an ethos where first year students bowed down in respect to their seniors, it is not fair to expect anything but the politest of interventions by the seniors. "Ragging was done to teach newcomers to respect the seniors and to make them conversant with the medical college traditions."

"The student residence consisted of a Hindu and a Muslim wing, with a temple and a mosque respectively," he writes. Saraswati Puja and Basant Panchami were celebrated with gusto, though the secular credentials of the present times dim their festivity. A final year posting at the mental hospital in Agra provided an opportunity for the KGMC students from Lucknow to come over. They were permitted to visit the ladies' hostel in fancy dress to canvass for votes. Times change….

Famous institutions like AIIMS. PGI, Amritsar Medical College, Ahmedabad Medical College, among many other medical colleges scattered over north India boast of alumni from S. N. Medical College playing a major role in starting individual departments in them, justifying its reputation of being the fountainhead of early medical education in the country. For sure, the "Made in Agra" label upholds its reputation for quality, transforming it into "Made in India" stamp of approval and recognition.

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